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Developing critical intercultural skills in novice teachers: Towards an ethics of teacher identity

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Background

The research reported in this paper is located at the intersection of two critical issues facing education in Australia at the beginning of the twenty-first century: 1.) The relatively high rates of attrition among new teachers, particularly those from 'Anglo-Celtic' backgrounds, i.e. the majority, when placed in schools in urban multicultural settings and; 2.) The educational underachievement and disengagement, including disenfranchisement from access to university education, of many students from Arab-Islamic backgrounds in Australian schools, a trend which coincides with rising levels of Islamophobia in Australian society.

The aim of the research reported in this paper is to address these seemingly disparate issues by developing critical intercultural awareness and skills in novice teachers of non-Arabic backgrounds, through a multidimensional, interventionist approach, involving different levels of activity (reflective work, the development, implementation and evaluation of classroom materials, and professional development) and different domains of engagement (the teachers, the schools and the wider community). The project is grounded in the belief that effective and engaging education involves academic learning and social identification (Wortham, 2006); that these both require teachers and schools to recognize, value, and build upon the cultural knowledge and experience of students and their communities; and that engaging in such micro-political work is an essential part of the ethical formation of teachers.

Research Questions

What intercultural knowledge and skills are required by 'Anglo-Celtic' teachers to enable them to work effectively with students from Arabic-Islamic communities?

How can teachers be assisted to engage in 'identity work' that involves care of self and other and contributes to the ethical self formation of teacher identities?

Methods

In order to achieve the above aims it is essential to gain an initial, detailed picture of the existing situation, including the beliefs and attitudes of various stakeholders and the intercultural knowledge needs of novice teachers. Suitable novice teachers were identified and 6 teachers were selected to participate. Data is subsequently being collected through an ethnographic-style approach involving observations, interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis, in order to generate a detailed and nuanced picture of teachers', students', and other stakeholders' discourses and practices in relation to education and schooling across each of the four axes of ethical self-formation (outlined in the frame below). The data will be analyzed using critical discourse analysis (Phillips & Jorgensen, 2002) to provide a picture of different stakeholders' constructions of schooling and education. This analysis will serve as the basis for a further stage of the research involving an intervention study.

Frame

This research project utilizes and builds on the concept of doing 'identity work' in teacher education (Clarke, 2009a, 2009b). This approach draws on Foucault's notions of 'historical ontology', 'ethical self-formation', and 'care of the self' (Foucault, 1983, 1985, 1986, 1997) as a basis for conducting work by the self on the self, in order to cultivate an ethos of critical responsiveness, and thus to ameliorate some of the adverse effects of identity's tendency to marginalize the differences upon

which it depends for its self-specification. Foucault's notion of ethics as self-formation through care of the self is framed in terms of four aspects or axes that provide foci for ethical work: the aspects or domains of the self that are problematized; the source of authority drawn on in managing these parts of the self; the techniques or practices of self-formation utilized; and the telos, or endpoint, of ethical self-formation (May, 2006; O'Leary, 2002). Importantly, ethical self-formation is not about self-absorption; rather, as Gore notes, it "suggests an ethic of self-disengagement and self-invention" (1993, p. 129). In the context of the above discourses of what we might call 'Anglo-Celtic normativity' (reinforced by the increasing neoliberal 'intensification' of teachers' work that discourages them from thinking about issues of ethics and politics that lie beyond neutrally constructed issues of 'performance' and 'achievement'), Foucault's ethical works provide a model for thinking about possibilities for engaged agency in education.

Given the interrelationship of care of self and care of other in this model, the research project promotes dialogue and seeks closer alignment between the identities of Anglo-Celtic teachers and students of Arab-Islamic backgrounds. Specifically, it frames the support structures required to assist novice teachers in developing greater intercultural sensitivity and skills by considering the views, attitudes, and needs of 'self' and 'other' in relation to the four axes of ethical self-formation: how education, schooling, and the educated person are viewed in themselves and in relation to other aspects of social life (axis 1); the sources of authority that shape and govern the self in relation to education (axis 2); the self-practices teachers, students and other stakeholders engage in, in relation to education in their everyday lives (axis 3); and finally, the ultimate aims and larger purposes of education as understood by teachers, students and other stakeholders (axis 4).

Research findings

In addition to employing identity theory to understand and address the two critical issues of new teacher attrition and Arab-Islamic student disengagement from education, noted above, the project is also valuable for its piloting and evaluation of a distinctive theoretical approach to working with issues of identity and community in education, based on the later work of Foucault and his notions of ethical self-formation, care of self and other, and building towards a theorization of an 'ethics of teacher identity'.